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Fashion Mogul Peter Nygard Indicted on Sex Trafficking Charges
by [Mary F.](#)

Peter Nygard is a Finnish-Canadian former fashion executive who founded Nygard International, a company that makes women's clothing, in 1967. In 2014, his net worth was estimated by Canadian Business Magazine to be about \$850 million.

Federal prosecutors in Manhattan on Tuesday indicted fashion mogul [Peter Nygard](#) on nine counts, including racketeering and sex-trafficking, that allegedly involved dozens of women, some of who were underage. He was arrested in the Canadian city of Winnipeg at the request of the US under the terms of the extradition treaty between the countries, the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York confirmed.

Nygard, 79, was accused of a "decades-long pattern of criminal conduct" in the United States, the Bahamas and Canada, according to a [release by the United States Department of Justice \(DoJ\)](#).

Nygard is accused of using the influence of the Nygard Group, an association of corporate entities of which he is the head, "as well as its employees, funds and other resources" to coerce adult and minor-aged female victims into having sex with him. Nygard is also accused of recruiting female victims for the "sexual gratification of his friends and business associates." "Nygard frequently targeted women and minor-aged girls who came from disadvantaged economic backgrounds and/or who had a history of abuse. He controlled his victims through threats, false promises of modeling opportunities and other career advancement, financial support and by other coercive means, including constant surveillance, restrictions of movement, and physical isolation. Nygard forcibly sexually assaulted some of his victims," the release states.

"Other victims were forcibly assaulted by Nygard's associates or drugged to ensure their compliance with his sexual demands," the release adds, also saying that Nygard provided illegal drugs and alcohol to the victims before sexual activity and "threatened and berated" women who did not agree to participate.

In February, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and New York Police raided Nygard's New York offices after sex-trafficking allegations were made against him. At the time, [the New York Times reported](#) that the investigation against Nygard had been underway for at least five months after authorities interviewed at least four women who said that Nygard raped them in the Bahamas when they were teenagers.

The four women were also plaintiffs in a February [lawsuit filed against Nygard](#) in New York, which accuses him of sex trafficking and other misconduct.

In February, after his offices were raided, a spokesperson for Nygard announced that the fashion mogul would step down as chairman and divest ownership of Nygard International,

“recognizing the priority of the welfare of the thousands of Nygard employees, retail partners, loyal customers, vendors, suppliers and business partners.”

Following the allegations made against him in February, many [retailers](#), including Dillard’s, announced that they would no longer be carrying Nygard’s fashion line.

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FDA Approves First At-Home, Over-The-Counter COVID-19 Test
by [Mary F.](#)

A rapid antigen test directly detects the presence or absence of an antigen, which in the case of COVID-19 is the virus SARS-CoV-2. Antigens induce an immune response in the body. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Tuesday granted an emergency use authorization for the first over-the-counter, at-home test for COVID-19.

According to a [news release by the regulatory body](#), the Ellume COVID-19 Home Test is a “rapid, lateral flow antigen test, a type of test that runs a liquid sample along a surface with reactive molecules.” According to the FDA, the test detects fragments of proteins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from a nasal swab sample taken from anyone who is 2 years of age or older. “Today’s authorization is a major milestone in diagnostic testing for COVID-19. By authorizing a test for over-the-counter use, the FDA allows it to be sold in places like drug stores, where a patient can buy it, swab their nose, run the test and find out their results in as little as 20 minutes,” FDA Commissioner Stephen M. Hahn said in the release.

“As we continue to authorize additional tests for home use, we are helping expand Americans’ access to testing, reducing the burden on laboratories and test supplies, and giving Americans more testing options from the comfort and safety of their own homes,” he added.

Similar to other antigen tests, a small percentage of positive and negative results from the test may be false, according to the FDA. False positives can be common when antigen tests are administered in populations where there is a low prevalence of COVID-19 infection.

According to [Ellume](#), the company that developed the test, the test equipment includes a nasal swab, a dropper, processing fluid and a Bluetooth-connected analyzer. Once the sample is analyzed, the results are automatically sent to the user’s smartphone via Bluetooth.

“Results are delivered in as little as 20 minutes to individuals via their smartphone. The mobile application requires individuals to input their zip code and date of birth, with optional fields including name and email address, and reports the results as appropriate to public health authorities to monitor disease prevalence,” the FDA explains in its release.

The company is expected to produce more than 3 million tests in January 2021.

The state-of-the-art COVID-19 test is still the real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test, which detects the genetic material of the coronavirus, [according to the FDA](#) and [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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Boko Haram Claims Responsibility for Kidnapping of Over 300 Boys in Nigeria
by [Mary F.](#)

Boko Haram is a jihadist, terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria. The group, founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, is also active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon and is responsible for killing tens of thousands of people and displacing more than 2 million from their homes, according to the Associated Press.

[Boko Haram](#)* on Tuesday claimed responsibility for abducting more than 300 boys from a secondary school in northwest Nigeria. The group said it kidnapped the students from an all-boys boarding school in Katsina to punish them for “un-Islamic practices,” marking one of the largest mass kidnappings of children in history, according to the [Wall Street Journal](#). However, the exact number of missing students remains unclear, [according to AFP](#).

The terrorist organization took responsibility for the kidnappings in an audio message released Tuesday. The authenticity of the audio clip, which features a voice that appears to be that of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, has yet to be verified.

“I am Abubakar Shekau and our brothers are behind the kidnapping in Katsina,” states the voice in the recording, which was obtained by AFP. “We carried out the Katsina attack for the religion of Allah to be supreme and to debase unbelief, because Western education is not Islamic and what is taught is not sanctioned by Allah and the Prophet”.

One of the students who escaped, 17-year-old Usama Male, revealed that the abduction started just after 10 p.m. on Friday after dozens of men began shooting Kalashnikov rifles into the air on the school campus before ordering the students to go deep into the forest.

“They said they would kill whoever tried to flee, but I positioned myself near the back and waited for a chance to run,” Male said, according to the Wall Street Journal. “Hundreds of my fellow pupils are still in captivity somewhere in the forest.”

Local authorities on Monday said that the abductors have “made contacts with the government,” reported AFP.

“Talks are ongoing to ensure their safety and return to their respective families,” Aminu Bello Masari, the governor of Katsina State, tweeted Monday.

“The security agencies deployed for rescue operations have also informed us that they have located their position,” Masari added.

The kidnapping is unusual because it took place outside of Boko Haram’s typical area of activity in the northeast part of Nigeria.

On Tuesday, an unidentified spokesperson for the US State Department [told Reuters](#) that the US condemned the abduction “in the strongest terms” and had launched an investigation into Boko Haram’s claim of responsibility.

This is not the first time that Boko Haram has claimed responsibility for a kidnapping. In 2014, the terrorist organization abducted 276 mostly Christian female students from a secondary school in the town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria. In February 2018, the [Wall Street Journal](#) [reported](#) that 112 of the girls were still missing, with 13 presumed dead.

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Tesla Asks Workers to 'Volunteer' at Factory During Closure as CEO Recently Named Second-Richest Man
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The electric-powered automobile manufacturer has posted profits for the last five quarters, and its CEO was recently catapulted to becoming the world's second-richest man. However, that hasn't stopped Tesla from asking its workers to put in some free time to help the company make even more profits.

In a bid to boost holiday deliveries, Tesla CEO Elon Musk has asked workers to pitch in for free for the second year in a row.

According to an email sent to factory employees [that was then passed to CNBC earlier this week](#), Tesla will shut down production of its Model S sedan and Model X sport utility vehicle for 18 days beginning on Christmas Eve. During that period, workers will get a full week's pay, but have been encouraged to "volunteer" on one of the other production lines or in the delivery department in order to help the company fill its orders.

"We are fortunate to have the high class problem of demand being quite a bit higher than production this quarter," Musk wrote in a separate email to employees that CNBC also obtained. "To ensure that we have the best possible customer outcome and earn the trust of the customers and investors who have placed their faith and hard-earned money with us, we need to increase production for the remainder of the quarter as much as possible."

"I would only send this note if it really mattered," he added. "Super appreciated."

[Last year, Tesla merged its sales and delivery departments](#) under an initiative dubbed "One Motion," in which the same employee who handles a customer's purchasing paperwork also delivers their car once it's complete, which can include driving a vehicle to the customer's home. Stock Values Skyrocket in 2020

Indeed, the Palo Alto-based carmaker has seen record profits over the past year, posting profits for the last five quarters and seeing its stock value skyrocket by 660% in 2020 to become the most powerful auto stock on the market. [Bloomberg noted on Sunday that Tesla's market value](#) is greater than GM, Ford Motor Co., Toyota Motor Corp., Volkswagen AG and BMW AG combined.

In May, [Musk warned Tesla's stock was already "too high."](#) clarifying earlier this month that its performance was a reflection of Wall Street investors' expectations for the company down the line.

"When looking at our actual profitability, it is very low at around 1% for the past year. Investors are giving us a lot of credit for future profitability, but if, at any point, they conclude that's not

going to happen, our stock will immediately get crushed like a souffle under a sledgehammer!" [he wrote in an email obtained by Bloomberg](#).

Indeed, Dan Ives, a Wedbush Securities senior tech analyst, [told Business Insider on Monday that he expected a huge](#) market expansion for Tesla in China, which has its own exploding electric car industry amid Beijing's push to totally [phase out cars fueled purely by gasoline by 2035](#). Tesla has said it hopes to sell 500,000 cars in 2020.

"The China growth story is worth at least \$100 per share in a bull case to Tesla as this EV penetration is set to ramp significantly over the next 12 to 18 months, along with major battery innovations coming out of Giga 3 and elsewhere throughout the China EV supply chain," Ives said, noting he expects a 56% increase in Tesla's stock value as a result, to \$1,000 per share. The meteoric rise in Tesla's value has helped [catapult Musk to the status of the world's second-richest man](#). Last month, his wealth was estimated at \$127.9 billion, ahead of Microsoft founder Bill Gates and second only to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whose fortune is estimated at \$182 billion.

That makes it all the stranger that Musk is asking his employees to volunteer their time on the factory line instead of simply sliding them some extra cash to take up an unfamiliar job in order to help him live up to investors' increasingly unrealistic expectations of the company.

It's not the first time he's asked this of his staff, either: [last December, Business Insider got ahold of an internal email](#) sent by Bert Bruggeman, Tesla's head of manufacturing, that noted the company was "facing a significant shortage of volunteers" for filling orders, asking: "If you are able to help, please sign up."

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Slain Iranian Gen. Soleimani's Daughter Slams Biden, Trump as 'The Same Guy' on Iran Policy by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the approaches of different US leaders toward relations with Iran have ebbed and flowed over the years, they have also demonstrated remarkable unity in opposing the Islamic Republic's autonomy and prosperity.

In the opening days of 2020, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, was killed by a US drone strike outside Baghdad International Airport. Soleimani was traveling with a host of leading figures from Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), including deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Afshin Rattansi, host of RT's "Going Underground," recently spoke with the slain general's daughter, Zaynab Soleimani, who condemned outgoing US President Donald Trump and incoming US President-elect Joe Biden in equal terms.

"There's no difference between Biden and Trump, they are the same guy," the younger Soleimani told Rattansi [in an interview due to air on Wednesday](#). "They are following the same policy, there is no difference between them. Trump ordered the killing of my father, but Biden supported that, so there's no difference."

"No American will mourn Qassem Soleimani's passing," [Biden said in a statement tweeted on January 2](#), when news of Soliemani's death broke in the US. "He deserved to be brought to justice for his crimes against American troops and thousands of innocents throughout the region. He supported terror and sowed chaos."

Trump claimed Soleimani, through the PMF and other groups, had masterminded terrorist attacks on US forces and was planning to attack four US embassies - claims senior administration and [defense officials told the Washington Post were doubtful](#) or exaggerated at best.

In reality, Soleimani's close association with the PMF stems from his leadership of Iran and Iraq's joint fight against Daesh, in which the PMF played a major role in evicting the terrorist group from Iraq and its eventual downfall.

"After killing my father, America thought that everything will be stopped, because they killed General Soleimani, the power of the Middle East. But they are so wrong," Zaynab Soleimani said.

However, Biden has also signaled his willingness to depart from Trump's policy and return to the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran that Trump unilaterally torpedoed in 2018.

Earlier this month, [Biden said "it's going to be hard," but he would resume cooperating](#) with Tehran under the terms of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) "as a starting point for follow-on negotiations" if Tehran returned to the agreement's constraints.

The deal stipulated that Iran would abandon its nuclear weapons program and retain only a small quantity of radioactive material for nuclear power plants and medical research, and in exchange the US and its allies would lower strangling economic sanctions against Iran. When Trump claimed against all evidence that Iran had broken the deal, the sanctions returned, crippling the country's economy.

"[T]he last goddamn thing we need in that part of the world is a buildup of nuclear capability," Biden added. "In consultation with our allies and partners, we're going to engage in negotiations and follow-on agreements to tighten and lengthen Iran's nuclear constraints, as well as address the missile program."

Biden's Iranian counterpart, President Hassan Rouhani, has signaled a willingness to cooperate, but noted that renegotiating the JCPOA was not on the table.

"The United States must return to the commitments it has already made," [Rouhani said at a Monday news conference](#). "[A]nd as we said before, if everyone returns to their full commitments, we will return to our full commitments ... I will not postpone it until the next hour." Biden was confirmed as president-elect by the US Electoral College on Monday and will be sworn in as US president on January 20, 2021.

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Televangelist's Megachurch Got \$4.4 Million in Small Business COVID-19 Bailout Cash - Report by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US lawmakers are set to renew the COVID-19 small business loan program, which expired in August, but with increased requirements for receiving the funds that render Joel Osteen's megachurch ineligible.

Lakewood Church, the largest megachurch in the United States, received \$4.4 million in bailouts aimed at supporting employees' salaries during the pandemic, [according to the Houston Business Journal](#).

The outlet reported that the arena-sized church got the loan in July via the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), [an initiative set up by Congress in March 2020](#) to distribute \$669 billion in support of small businesses, which were hit the hardest by the mass closures and restricted business operations brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Journal further noted Lakewood's loan was the third-largest in the Houston area in July or August, and that about 1,500 religious organizations in the area received PPP loans, 20 of which were for more than \$1 million.

Donald Iloff, a spokesperson for the church, told Journal the cash went to 368 full-time employees because the suspension of in-person services from mid-March until mid-October impacted "its ability to collect substantial donations during those services."

Osteen himself wouldn't have gotten a paycheck from the program, since he collects no regular stipend from the church. However, he's certainly not short on cash, either: [International Business Times reported in August](#) that Osteen's net worth had reached \$100 million.

If the money loaned under the PPP was used to pay employees' paychecks, then the loans will be forgiven, [according to the program's website](#).

While the PPP expired in August, a renewed version of it will be a part of the new stimulus bill now being debated by Congress. However, it will have steeper requirements, with maximum employees for a firm being reduced from 500 to 300 and applicants having to demonstrate a 30% loss in at least one business quarter of 2020, [according to Axios](#).

Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State [denounced the bailout, telling the Houston Chronicle](#) it was "direct government funding of religion."

"And once government funding enters the equation, all bets are off," Boston added. "It then becomes a matter of public interest to determine if taxpayer money was spent in accordance with whatever law we're talking about."

Osteen previously received strong criticism for initially [refusing to open the doors of the 16,000-seat Lakewood Church](#) to victims of Hurricane Harvey, which struck eastern Texas in August 2017, producing catastrophic flooding that inundated much of Houston.

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Chinese Paper Predicts Western 'Tsunami-Level' Attack if Beijing Suffered US' COVID-19 Deaths
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The sobering milestone of 300,000 COVID-19 deaths in the US, more than all US soldiers killed in combat in World War II, was passed on Monday. However, US leadership has remained

critical not of its own failures, but of invented failures by China, which they blame for failing to contain the illness.

By Tuesday, 302,300 Americans had died from COVID-19 and at least 16.6 million had been infected by the virus, [according to data collected by the New York Times](#). Data from the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) shows the seven-day moving average for daily new cases stands at 213,537.

By contrast, [China reported 17 new cases of COVID-19 on Monday](#) and has only recorded a grand total of 86,758 cases, with 4,634 people dying of the illness. Nearly all of those cases and deaths occurred in the first quarter of 2020, when COVID-19 initially broke out in Wuhan, the metropolis at the center of China's Hubei Province.

However, what if these situations were reversed, and it was China that was suffering the catastrophic effects of a badly mismanaged pandemic that had killed close to one-third of a million people? That's the question [asked by the editorial staff of the Global Times in a Tuesday op-ed](#).

Onslaught Would Be 'Beyond Imagination'

"The situation would definitely be much worse than what happened in January and February when the epidemic broke out in Wuhan. China would become an absolute target of Western public opinion, and the pressure on China would not only be at the public opinion level," they noted.

"If 300,000 people died in China from the coronavirus, the intense Western onslaught on China would be beyond imagination."

The Times predicted the US and other Western nations would offer humanitarian assistance, "but such sympathy will not extend to the political realm." Instead, they would pursue investigations aimed at exposing the "underlying causes" of the outbreak and China's inability to halt it.

"First, they would stress that this is a huge humanitarian disaster in China - not a natural disaster, but a man-made one," Global Times wrote, noting similar claims about the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster had helped influence the collapse of the USSR.

The paper predicted that Western nations would use the mass death to cast Beijing as indifferent to human life and say this indifference comes from its so-called authoritarian system, contrasting it to the West's respect and value for all human lives.

Any sort of political or social turmoil that arose during the pandemic in China would be labeled by the West as a symptom of its morbid culture and system, they said, and if things got bad enough, they might even launch a military offensive to capitalize on China's moment of historic weakness, doing in the socialist rival for good.

"In short, if China were the country with the worst response and greatest loss in the global disaster, the US and the West would have launched a tsunami-level ideological attack against China. The attack will extend to other areas and lead to a major and long-term confrontation. Fortunately, the actual situation is the opposite. However, the possible fierce attacks by the US on China did not become its self-reflection. Some of them have really happened in their own countries," the Times' editors wrote.

Real World Offensive on China

However, back here in the real world, the pressure on China by Washington in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is already extremely high. As early as April, [US President Donald Trump](#)

[said it seemed China's official case](#) and death numbers were "a little bit on the light side," suggesting without evidence that Beijing was lying to conceal a much greater spread of the disease than it was telling the world.

The following month, [Trump pulled the US out of the World Health Organization](#), claiming the UN agency was dominated by China and had allowed itself to be bamboozled by China's claims about the novel coronavirus. This, Trump said, had caused the virus to spread to the rest of the globe, including the US, which greeted the pandemic with a flat-footed response. By that time, more than 100,000 Americans had died of COVID-19.

Then, at the United Nations General Assembly in September, Trump raged about "the China virus," [a term he adopted in news conferences and campaign rallies](#) over the course of the year that [helped inspire racist attacks on Chinese-Americans](#). By the time of the annual New York conference, more than 200,000 Americans had died of COVID-19.

On December 8, [the world commemorated the first anniversary](#) of the first known COVID-19 cases being discovered. However, the disease was not identified as a unique illness from other related coronaviruses [until January 12, when Chinese authorities sequenced SARS-CoV-2](#), the virus that causes COVID-19, realizing it was not SARS-CoV-1, a respiratory illness that killed 774 people between 2002 and 2004.

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Electoral Fraud - Political Cartoon

In the six weeks that have followed the 2020 US election, US President Donald Trump has - to no one's surprise - stuck to spewing allegations of voter fraud, even going so far as to fire the director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency for disputing his claims. Trump on Tuesday refused to fall in line and acknowledge Democratic challenger Joe Biden as the valid winner of the presidential election, despite the Monday results that came from electors of the US' Electoral College system.

Even after [Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\) and fellow Republicans](#) slowly began to recognize Biden's win, Trump has [remained firm](#) on his unproven beliefs that fraud caused him to lose his bid for a second term.

"Tremendous problems being found with voting machines," Trump [wrote in an early Tuesday tweet](#), adding that a ["68% error rate"](#) was reportedly detected in systems in Michigan.

The next step in the US' election process will take place on January 6, 2021, when the House of Representatives recounts votes from the electors to affirm Biden's win. But will Trump accept the results then? Stay tuned, folks.

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One in Four Americans Eager to Take COVID-19 Vaccine Once Available to Public - Poll
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The latest tally by the Johns Hopkins University indicates that the US has maintained a COVID-19 positivity ratio of over 11% as some 193,454 new cases were reported on Monday. The US states seeing the highest case counts, in order, are California, Arizona, Texas, Tennessee and Pennsylvania.

A new [Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index survey](#) released Tuesday has found that 1 in 4 surveyed Americans intend to sign themselves up to get a [COVID-19](#) vaccine as soon as it's available to the public.

The US presently has one approved COVID-19 vaccine that began its initial rollout on Monday. Pharmaceutical company Pfizer has shipped nearly 3 million doses of the two-part vaccine across the US, with the intention of the drug being first given to medical professionals and nursing home residents and staffers.

The survey, which polled a sample of 1,009 adults, determined that rising interest in being vaccinated was "particularly pronounced among older Americans, especially those over age 65." The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has indicated that older Americans are at a much greater risk of dying or requiring hospitalization after contracting the respiratory disease. The agency found that [80% of COVID-19 deaths](#) in the US involved individuals aged 65 or older.

"Overall, Americans are evenly split on whether they plan to get it soon or later on: 38% say as soon as it's available or a few weeks after, while 40% plan for a few months after, or a year or more after," reads the survey.

However, 21% of the respondents indicated that they had zero interest in having the vaccine administered, a figure that remains unchanged from a September poll's results. Officials noted that Black Americans, individuals who obtained a high school diploma or less and those who were aligned with the Republican Party were the least likely to be convinced on getting the vaccine.

Over the last several months, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on black communities across the US. The [CDC has found](#) that when compared to white Americans, Black Americans are 1.4 times more likely to contract the disease and 2.8 times more likely to die from it.

And yet, it's not surprising that many in black communities are hesitant about being first in line for a new vaccine, since, as history proves, Black Americans have been largely sidestepped and mistreated by the medical system. Many skeptical of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout point to the [40-year Tuskegee Syphilis Study](#) that saw medical professionals forgo treating black participants even after penicillin became widely available by 1947, a whopping 15 years after the study was initiated.

Brittani James, a doctor who serves the predominantly black communities of Chicago's South Side, [told NBC News](#) that Black Americans' hesitancy toward the vaccine is not a result of paranoia or being uninformed on the subject matter.

"The reality is that their worries have been earned and will not be corrected until medicine and public health and the government reckon with the past and what has been done to Black and brown people," she said.

At present, the US has documented [more than 302,000 COVID-19 deaths](#) since the onset of the pandemic; however, [estimates by the CDC](#) suggest that tally may hit 362,000 by the end of the week ending January 2, 2021.

The survey found that when it came to political affiliations, the majority of individuals who identified as Democrats believed that the pandemic death toll was higher than reported by health officials, whereas Republicans believed the count was inflated and that the toll was less than what is being documented.

With the holiday season in full swing, 35% of the participants acknowledged that they felt they were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 now than when the pandemic reached its initial heights in April.

Anthony Fauci, the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who also serves as a member of the White House coronavirus task force, [recently warned](#) that the holiday gatherings around Christmas and into the new year were likely to cause COVID-19 case numbers to surge since more indoor meet-ups were likely to unfold.

The latest Axios-Ipsos poll was conducted between December 11 and 14. The margin of error was 3.3 percentage points.

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Olympic Torch Relay for 2020 Tokyo Games Will Start in 100 Days, Organizers Reveal
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizers for the 2020 Olympic Games had been considering the possibility of outright canceling the historic tournament's torch relay over cost and safety concerns; however, the idea was subsequently scrapped by committee officials.

Organizers for the 2020 Tokyo Games [announced Tuesday](#) that the sports tournament's torch relay will take place as originally planned and will begin next year on March 25 - in exactly 100 days - in the northeastern prefecture of Fukushima.

After starting the journey in Fukushima's J-Village National Training Center, the torch will be passed from bearer to bearer through a total of 859 municipalities across the country's 47 prefectures before arriving at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo on July 23 for the start of the games.

In an effort to further promote the looming start of the Olympic games, officials organized a "special illumination" of the Tokyo Skytree, a broadcasting and observation tower that holds the title of world's tallest tower, [measuring 2,080 feet](#).

The 121-day relay will involve an estimated 10,000 torch bearers in addition to the tens of thousands of officials who will be working to make sure the event runs smoothly and stays in line with COVID-19 countermeasures.

Yukihiko Nunomura, vice director general of the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee, said [during an online news conference](#) that "social distancing will be considered at the gathering spots and the Torch kiss scenes."

"We want to simplify the program as much as possible and have been trying to minimize the number of vehicles and also the spectators," he added, before underscoring that the group intends to "maximize our efforts to prevent the COVID-19 spread and take sufficient countermeasures."

Although organizers have largely kept mum on the specific details of the preventive measures being considered to ensure athletes and game officials do not contract the respiratory disease, reports suggest that masks, social distancing, hand sanitizing and open ventilation will be at the core of the regulations imposed by organizers.

The [Olympic Channel revealed](#) in early December that athletes competing in the Olympic and Paralympic Games will undergo a COVID-19 test at least every four days and have their movements traced via a phone app throughout their stay in Japan.

Additional details regarding the measures are not expected to be released until early next year. Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike [told the Associated Press](#) during a Monday interview that the emerging COVID-19 vaccines are serving as "a ray of hope."

Earlier announcements from the games' organizing committee and the Japanese government revealed that the historic postponement of the tournament [would cost officials nearly \\$3 billion](#), the majority of which will go to implementing COVID-19 countermeasures.

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COVID-19, Border Wall & Economic Stall: How Have Trump's Domestic Politics Fared in His Four Years?

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

No stranger to controversy, US President Donald Trump's first term in office has been riddled with contentious domestic issues, including his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, nonexistent health care replacement for the Affordable Care Act and even his initiative to bolster the US' southern border.

As Trump's hold on the White House dwindles even further - now that electors have cast their ballots for the next commander-in-chief - just how well has the president managed to avoid landmines on domestic issues over the last four years?

Although Trump did manage to hit the ground running at the start of his presidency, it was soon proved that much of his decision-making would require the use of executive orders. [According to the Federal Register](#), Trump has issued 198 such orders, with the highest tally being recorded in 2020.

Strengthening US' Borders

In fact, an executive order issued just seven days after Trump's 2017 inauguration banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries - Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen - from visiting the US, a highly controversial move which quickly saw Trump met by a [series](#) of [legal challenges](#).

At the time, Trump explained he signed the order because it would help to [“prevent a beachhead of intolerance,”](#) and that it would make certain that individuals entering the US share its values. However, the order was [immediately opposed by the public](#).

Jorge Baron, the executive director of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, [told Sputnik at the time](#) that the “unlawful” order violated US immigration laws and undermined the US judiciary system.

And then there was also the border wall, which was started by - yep, you guessed it - an [executive order](#) that was signed five days after Trump’s inauguration. The matter of the wall along the US-Mexico border has faced a mixed response, with the president’s supporters hailing the move and others, understandably, criticizing the action as a US money pit that [wouldn’t be funded by Mexico](#), as [Trump had repeatedly suggested](#).

Of the 1,954 miles that make up the US’ southern border, Trump’s infamous steel-and-concrete reinforced wall has only managed to cover a 423-mile-stretch, according to [estimates from the US Customs and Border Protection](#), which itself was given overreaching abilities by Trump to [carry out mass arrests](#) across the US early on in the administration.

Both actions were in keeping with Trump’s campaign promises to clamp down on illegal immigration, which would suggest a victory for the president; however, it’s uncertain just how much of a success the orders truly were, considering the travel ban was continuously paused in the courts, and that an overwhelming majority of illegal immigration occurs not through unlawful crossings of the southern border, but as a [result of individuals overstaying their visas](#).

Affordable Care Act

Trump was also unsuccessful in replacing the Obama administration’s so-called “disastrous” Affordable Care Act (ACA), which he initially promised would be one of the first measures to be overturned during his presidency. Trump suggested in his early campaigning days that he would provide a comprehensive replacement within his first 100 days in office.

Promises made by the incoming president suggested that Americans would be given a health care plan that provided [“insurance for everybody.”](#) During a joint address to Congress in February 2017, Trump explained that his vision for an ACA replacement included “reforms that expand choice, increase access, lower costs and, at the same time, provide better health care.” “Mandating every American to buy government-approved health insurance was never the right solution for our country,” Trump [told congressional lawmakers](#). “The way to make health insurance available to everyone is to lower the cost of health insurance, and that is what we are going [to] do.”

Yet, whenever Trump was asked to give more specifics on his yet-to-be released plan, he never quite hit the mark, other than saying that it would be [“very inclusive”](#) and that it would be coming soon.

To date, no plan offering a total makeover of the ACA has actually emerged, with Trump issuing symbolic executive orders, such as the one signed earlier this year to protect Americans with pre-existing conditions despite ACA provisions already providing such protections. When questioned on the matter, Trump explained that it would simply serve as a [“double safety net.”](#) The commander-in-chief was, however, able to completely kill an ACA mandate that fined Americans who were not enrolled in a health insurance plan. CNBC reported at the time that the tax penalty imposed by the [mandate could exceed \\$500 for an adult](#).

Timothy Jost, a health care policy expert with Virginia's Washington and Lee University, said that "by most measures, Donald Trump's health policy record is one of failure."

"President Trump ran for office promising to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, which had significantly expanded health insurance coverage during the Obama administration," Jost said. "His attempts to repeal the ACA failed, however, even though Trump's Republican Party controlled both houses of Congress for the first half of his administration."

"Although President Trump repeatedly promised to release a plan to replace the ACA, he never actually did so, and probably never had such a plan. The number of uninsured Americans grew by over 2 million under Trump's presidency even before the COVID-19 pandemic," he continued.

COVID-19 Efforts

The novel coronavirus outbreak also proved to worsen Trump's ability to effectively address health care issues and saw him give increasingly worried Americans contradicting messages on how best to avoid contracting SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

At the onset of the pandemic, Trump often likened the [respiratory disease to the seasonal flu](#), saying it would quickly disappear while also repeatedly expressing skepticism over the effectiveness of face masks. In fact, [it was not until July](#), months after the pandemic was declared that Trump first donned a mask himself.

Trump for a period of time held daily press briefings on the state of COVID-19 after receiving criticism for his lax stance on the growing epidemic at the time, but they quickly diminished in frequency not long after he seemed to suggest that injecting disinfectant could be a valid COVID-19 treatment.

Trump later [stated that he was joking](#), but the damage was already done. He also revealed months afterward to journalist Bob Woodward that he was aware of the severity of COVID-19 much earlier but opted to not express it to the public [so as to not cause alarm](#).

Early preventative moves by the administration saw Trump issue an order to temporarily bar foreign nationals who traveled to China from entering the US. US citizens and permanent residents who returned to the Land of the Free were subjected to screenings and required to undergo a 14-day quarantine.

Policy-wise, Trump launched the White House coronavirus task force, which in turn [issued various guidances](#) that urged Americans to avoid unnecessary travel, practice good hygiene, avoid social gatherings and opt for remote work if possible in an effort to slow the virus' spread. In spite of the guidance, COVID-19 cases and deaths only continued to spike across the US as health experts were still learning about how the respiratory disease was transmitted. As the months passed, figures ballooned due to a combination of COVID-19 fatigue and groups of Americans simply refusing to adhere to the preventative measures.

In many instances, the so-called anti-mask movement led to confrontations nationwide at retail stores between workers and customers who refused to follow masking measures. Frustrated Americans who rejected the severity of the pandemic also held demonstrations that called for the reopening of businesses and school systems and accused state officials of violating their freedoms.

Trump's early stances to sidestep the use of masks and not issue any hardline rules, but rather guidance on COVID-19, also only helped to fuel the movement's opposition. Even Trump's own COVID-19 diagnosis and subsequent White House photo-op [days after being discharged from](#)

[the hospital](#) ignited beliefs that the virus wasn't as serious as many health professionals had said.

At present, the US is the country with the highest case tally and death toll, according to the [latest records by Johns Hopkins University](#), though it stacks up a bit better in terms of [per capita death rate](#).

Jost remarked, "Most notably, [Trump's] mismanagement, denial, and promotion of false information has contributed to the United States' COVID-19 statistics being among the worst in the world, with over 15 million cases and nearly 300,000 deaths."

While one can say that the president largely dropped the ball, the Trump administration did see the launch of [Operation Warp Speed](#) to accelerate the creation of COVID-19 vaccines, of which the top three US candidates are expected to receive clearance [from the US Food and Drug Administration](#).

Vlad Davidiuk, a Republican strategist and political analyst, said that Trump's "approach to handling the pandemic has been as good as can be expected, given the circumstances," explaining that the president's efforts to shut down flights to and from China helped to somewhat curb the disease's spread, as the initial outbreak was detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Death of George Floyd And Subsequent Protests

Minnesota resident George Floyd was killed in late May when a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for a period of eight minutes and 46 seconds, despite the fact that he had repeatedly told the officer that he could not breathe.

The cellphone video that emerged from the scene sparked a national uprising, with [hundreds of thousands of Americans protesting](#) against the police brutality that has overwhelmingly affected minority communities, especially Black Americans. The outrage that stemmed from Floyd's death also brought renewed attention to the cases of [Eric Garner](#), [Alton Sterling](#), [Philando Castile](#), [Stephon Clark](#) and [Elijah McClain](#), among others, but also allowed for new analysis of the cases of [Breonna Taylor](#) and [Ahmaud Arbery](#).

Trump's response to the protests, however, weren't the definition of supportive, as he eventually moved to attack the Black Lives Matter movement, referring to it as "[an extreme socialist organization](#)" that was to blame for the pockets of violent protests that broke out in US cities. And then there was the deployment of the US National Guard to "restore law and order," a tagline which the president quickly reiterated time and time again on social media ahead of the US election.

This year saw the National Guard deployed to [Portland, Oregon](#), and [Chicago, Illinois](#), but tensions between the federal government and protesters reached an all-time high in June when Trump held a Rose Garden event where he threatened to use the military to quell unrest before having guards, clad in riot gear, deploy pepper spray to clear a park near the White House [for a photo-op outside a historic church](#).

Though criticism arose following the June incident, Trump defended his actions and called the photo-op a "very symbolic" moment. Trump wasn't only bashed by everyday Americans for the photo op, but also by former US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis, who in a statement to The Atlantic called the incident an "[abuse of executive authority](#)."

US Space Force

One of Trump's biggest successes came from the signing of the \$738 billion defence spending bill in late December 2019 that established the US Space Force (USSF), the first new military service since the US Air Force was created in 1947.

While it was widely mocked across the spectrum, with late night hosts and comedy writers using the creation as fuel for endless sketches, the US Space Force was created as a way to maintain the US' superiority in the cosmos and to protect its assets in space.

Gen. John Raymond, whom Trump tapped to lead the new US military division, [told reporters at the time that](#) the USSF was "not a farce" and was "nationally critical." He added, "We are elevating space commensurate with its importance to our national security and the security of our allies and partners."

Though the branch's focus will largely be national security, it's also possible that service members enlisted in the USSF may soon become more aware of potential extraterrestrial life that the Trump administration, [specifically Trump himself, is reportedly aware of](#).

Judiciary Legacy

Similar to the USSF, one of Trump's more long-lasting impacts on the country will be that of his reshaping of the federal judiciary.

During his four years in office, Trump managed to appoint three justices to the US Supreme Court, despite strong pushback from Democrats. Additionally, the president added another 220 judges installed on the federal bench for lifetime appointments.

A [2019 analysis by The Washington Post found](#) that Trump nominees make up roughly 25% of all US circuit court judges.

Even though Trump's influence on the federal judiciary will far outlast his own time in the Oval Office, not all agree that the appointments to the federal bench are solely Trump's success. Charles Anthony Smith, a professor of political science and law at the University of California, Irvine, stated that "it would be a mistake to give him too much credit for those efforts," since it was "more of an accomplishment by [Senate Majority Leader Mitch] McConnell than by Trump." "It is striking that four years ago Trump bragged about paying for an abortion and some are trying to give him credit for appointing three justices to the Supreme Court that might overturn Roe v Wade," Smith said. "In other words, my expectation is that history will credit McConnell with this rather than Trump. History is typically pretty cruel to one-term presidents and diminishes them relatively quickly."

Smith further predicted that Trump's efforts to politicize the US Department of Justice "may actually mean the next few presidents have to be very hands-off in order to restore morale" and "shed the taint of political motivations in prosecutions."

'Worst is Yet to Come' Amid US' Economic Struggles

Trump's signature legislative achievement remains the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA), a Republican tax bill that became known as the biggest overhaul to the US' tax code in over 30 years.

The changes slashed the corporate income tax rate down to 21% - instead of the 15% Trump promised on the campaign trail - and were quickly seen as a lopsided win for corporations due to significant cuts to investment income tax and estate tax with the hopes of creating an economic boost; however, the measure hasn't entirely lived up to its expectations.

On the campaign trail, Trump promised that everyone - especially the middle class - would receive a tax break once his reforms were put in place, but ultimately it turned out that it was

wealthier households that wound up with a hefty break, according to an [analysis from the Tax Policy Center](#).

Trump had promised to bring the individual income tax rate from 39.6% to 33%, but only managed to bring it down to 37%. The [Economic Times also reported](#) that wealthy Americans “received 60% of the total tax savings.”

“On purely economic terms, Trump's presidency will go down to history as a great success for the billionaire class, and a dismal failure for the working class,” said Dr. Giovanni Di Lieto, a trade policy expert and commercial law fellow at the University of Bologna. “Those in the middle had varied outcomes and will judge Trump's economic performance based on the contingencies of the industries upon which their wealth and income happen to depend.”

“This is regardless, or in some cases even thanks to the COVID-19 crisis, which triggered monetary stimulus measures that further entrenched larger than ever capital accumulation in the hands of the richest 0.1%,” he added.

Early on the pandemic, it became clear that COVID-19 would have a deep impact on the US and global economy as a result of countries implementing countrywide shutdowns in order to curb the spread of the disease.

While the US unemployment rate had experienced a 50-year low prior to the pandemic, the situation quickly shifted and sent the jobless rate spiking to 14.7%, its highest level since the Great Depression. The [US Labor Department reported in May](#) that some 20.5 million Americans were suddenly left jobless in April at the initial height of lockdown measures.

Incidentally, Trump's early promises suggested that his policies would help to bolster the economy and allow for the creation of some 25 million jobs in the 10 years that followed his arrival to the White House.

Michael Pento, president and founder of financial consultant agency Pento Portfolio Strategies, says that “Trump did many good things for the economy but failed to fix its core problems,” as he motivated “habits of relying on debt, bubbles and free money.”

Pento predicts that “the worst is yet to come” for the US in terms of its growing national debt and stalled economy as COVID-19 continues to ravage much of the country.

Analysis by [financial company The Balance](#) determined that the current national debt reached \$26.9 trillion at the end of fiscal year 2020, and that Trump added about \$6.7 trillion to the total during his time in office.

Divided Presidency & Impeachment Shadow

Even before Trump clinched the White House, rumors and reports emerged of foreign interference in the 2016 US election, eventually prompting special counsel Robert Mueller to begin an investigation in 2017 into alleged collusion between Russia and Trump campaign officials.

While the allegations were repeatedly and sternly rejected by Russia, the investigation ultimately saw several of Trump's allies, such as former personal lawyer Michael Cohen, former national security adviser Michael Flynn and campaign officials George Papadopoulos and Rick Gates, come under fire.

The investigation [culminated in the 230 to 197 vote by the US House of Representatives](#) to impeach Trump for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The not-so-shocking vote marked Trump as the third president in history to be charged with committing high crimes.

Davidiuk expressed that the impeachment was “baked-in from the moment he defeated [2016 Democratic challenger] Hillary Clinton.”

“[Impeaching Trump] was a goal that the left implemented before his presidency even began. The left was obsessed with at least impeaching him and tainting his presidency, with hopes of actually removing him from office,” he said.

“Americans who supported or opposed him did not have their perspectives changed one way or another, but it did serve to further polarize the electorate, driving the division of Americans even further.”

Incidentally, a survey by Public Policy Polling found that [roughly 40% of Americans voters](#) wanted to see Trump impeached just two weeks into his administration. After the impeachment proceedings wrapped, that [figure jumped to 42% when individuals](#) were polled through a national online Reuters/Ipsos opinion survey.

Political Opposition From the Get-Go

Even before Trump won the golden ticket to the White House, it was clear that Democrats would fight him every step of the way during his administration, just as everyday Americans would use their right to protest to voice their disdain for the 45th president.

As much of the opposition’s efforts were focused on getting rid of Trump by way of the Russiagate investigation, Democrats used every opportunity to stall policies and appointments - even going so far as to allow two government shutdowns.

Democratic Fight Against SCOTUS Nominations

One of the very first fights taken on by Democrats was in regards to the nomination of conservative judge Neil Gorsuch to the US Supreme Court. At the time, lawmakers including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) rallied against the nomination, arguing that Gorsuch’s track record showed a preference for corporate interests.

Gorsuch was eventually confirmed some two months after Trump filed his nomination in early February 2017, but the Colorado-born justice wasn’t the only nominee to see strong pushback. In fact, Trump’s second appointment to the bench, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, came under the microscope even more so after allegations emerged that he had [sexually assaulted Christine Blasey Ford](#) when the pair attended a high school in the Maryland suburbs.

But just like Gorsuch’s clearance to the nation’s highest court, Kavanaugh managed to attain the coveted legal job despite [several motions and coordinated moves by Democrats](#) to stall the looming green light, including [earlier efforts to halt proceedings](#) in order to obtain documents that would have offered additional insight into Kavanaugh’s time as an aide to former US President George W. Bush.

However, even after Kavanaugh arrived at the US Supreme Court, Democrats didn’t waver. Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) in September 2019 called on members of the House of Representatives to [take up a new investigation](#) into the justice after new sexual misconduct allegations emerged that dated back to when Kavanaugh was in college.

And then there was Trump’s nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, which prompted Democrats to immediately lambast their Republican counterparts after they decided to open the floor to her subsequent Supreme Court confirmation. In 2016, as former US President Barack Obama’s term was coming to a close, Republicans refused his administration’s shot at filling a vacant

seat on the court, arguing that the position should only be filled once the new president, in this case Trump, was elected.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) criticized Republicans and said that [“history will haunt this raw exercise of power.”](#) Democrats later turned their ire to the conservative nominee, who they feared was far too hostile to the ACA and more specifically women’s right to choose, as her arrival to the bench would lean the court further right on the political spectrum.

Following Barrett’s confirmation, Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) [issued a statement](#) calling the development a “bleak day” for the US Senate and the nation. He added, “This day will long be remembered as the moment when Republicans tore up their own rules to ignore the will of the American people and pack the Supreme Court with right-wing ideologues who will compromise Americans’ rights and civil liberties.”

Congressional Disagreements Prompt Two Government Shutdowns

Disputes between Trump and Democrats in Congress also brought about two government shutdowns, the first of which took place in January 2018 amid disagreements over the funding for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and assurances against the deportation of individuals who would be protected under the proposed Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act.

The Obama-era DACA program allows young immigrants who were brought into the country as children illegally to remain living in the US. The DREAM Act, legislation that has yet to be passed by Congress, would create a pathway for immigrants to obtain their citizenship and remain in the US.

Republicans at the time were intending to [pass a stopgap measure](#) to keep the government afloat for a period of four weeks; however, their bid fell flat when they failed to snag the required amount of votes, as Democrats remained firm on their stances on immigration reform.

The White House was quick to blame the shutdown on Democrats, referring to the political party as “obstructionist losers, not legislators.” A [statement released by the White House press secretary](#) noted that the administration would not “negotiate the status of unlawful immigrants while Democrats hold our lawful citizens hostage over their reckless demands.”

Although the first shutdown only lasted for three days before Democrats let up on their demands, Schumer did indicate that had offered to [“put \[funding for\] the border wall on the table”](#) to avoid a shutdown during earlier discussions with the president, but it was not enough for Trump to make a deal. In allowing the shutdown to come to a close, Democrats were promised new talks on handling the DACA program and DREAM Act.

Eleven months later, the US government found itself on the cusp of a second Trump-era shutdown. This time, however, the lights went out after lawmakers were unable to reach a deal that allocated some \$5.7 billion for the construction of Trump’s long-promised border wall. Democrats overwhelmingly opposed passing a spending bill that contained funding for Trump’s border wall, fully maintaining that such an allocation would prove ineffective - even a [Republican congressman whose district sits along the border](#) flipped and sided with members across the aisle on the matter.

All nine congressional representatives who serve districts that span across the US-Mexico border were wholly against Trump’s border wall visions. Rep. Vicente Gonzalez (D-TX) called the wall efforts a “4th-century solution to a 21st century problem,” and further explained in

[comments to CBS News at the time](#) that the wall wouldn't create "real border security, and it comes at a major cost to taxpayers."

In the end, the shutdown lasted a total of 34 days, becoming the [longest such closure in US history](#). As for Trump, he never did manage to get congressional lawmakers to approve his desired funding for the border wall.

However, blocks from Congress weren't going to keep the commander-in-chief down for too long. A few weeks after the shutdown was lifted, Trump managed to get a hold of the funds by [declaring a national emergency](#) at the southern border.

While Trump has had more downs than ups during his four years in the Oval Office, it's anyone's guess whether he may try to better deliver on his campaign promises should he be granted the chance of a second term. Trump has [hinted that he may run in the 2024 presidential election](#), a report which, if true, could soon make a [good amount of Republican voters](#) jump for joy.

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Facebook Partially Lifts Political Advertising Ban for Upcoming Georgia Runoff Elections
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Social media giant Facebook implemented a ban on political advertising ahead of the 2020 US election in an effort to further avoid misinformation or confusion from spreading, given that it was known that the COVID-19 pandemic would prompt a delay in results.

Facebook [announced in a Tuesday blog post](#) that it will be partially lifting its recent ban on political advertisements, allowing campaigns and political parties to run digital ads targeting Georgia voters ahead of the state's upcoming runoff elections.

The company indicated that clearance would only be given to advertisers who have completed its ad authorization process, and it will only allow ads that focus on the January 5 runoff elections that are set to determine [whether Republicans or Democrats will gain control of the US Senate](#) in the new congressional session.

"We will reject ads that target locations outside of Georgia or that are not about the Georgia runoff elections for violating our Advertising Policies," reads the advisory.

The changes are due to take effect on Wednesday at 9 a.m. Pacific Time.

Facebook's update did not include an explanation as to why it was partially lifting its ban, but the Tuesday notice did state the change was made after the company received "feedback from experts and advertisers across the political spectrum" about the importance of ads for the Georgia election specifically.

"At this time, we are maintaining the temporary pause for ads about social issues, elections or politics outside of Georgia as part of our ongoing efforts to protect the integrity of the election and reduce opportunities for confusion or abuse," the update concludes.

It's unclear when Facebook may lift the ban entirely.

Search engine company Google took similar steps in banning political ads in the aftermath of the 2020 election; however, the company lifted its five-week-long ban on December 9 after concluding that the post-election period was no longer a "[sensitive event](#)."

Facebook's announcement comes one day after electors of the Electoral College cast their ballots and [confirmed Democratic challenger Joe Biden](#) as the winner of the 2020 presidential election. The US House of Representatives will affirm the win with a recount of the electoral ballots on January 6, 2021.

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Cuban Officials Reject Claims That 'Havana Syndrome' Was Caused by Directed Radio Frequency Energy
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In late 2016, reports emerged that staff members at US and Canadian embassies in Havana, Cuba, were experiencing symptoms that included hearing loss, dizziness and a sensation or vibration of pressure in the head. The mysterious health effects resulted in the US accusing Cuba of carrying out attacks on its diplomats, resulting in new hostilities.

Cuban officials [issued a statement on Tuesday](#) rejecting claims made in a US report that alleged directed radio frequency energy was likely to blame for mysterious health ailments suffered by several diplomats working in Havana, Cuba.

Luis Velázquez, the president of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, noted in the release that the organization disagrees with the [National Academies of Sciences \(NAS\) December 6 report](#), even though it "made progress in defining the medical characterization of the causes and issued valid recommendations."

"The report does not provide scientific evidence that radio frequency waves of great intensity existed in the area where the diplomats were located," the statement read, before underscoring that the NAS conclusion was more of a hypothesis and "certainly not a proven fact."

The NAS report was commissioned by the US State Department, a fact which likely raised red flags for the Cuban organization.

Velázquez's [statement further stressed](#) that the Cuban body recommended both "journalists and governments to listen to science and refrain from endorsing conspiracy theories." He added that symptoms reported by the affected individuals "should be considered and treated as a health problem, not as a political issue."

NAS explained in its reporting that it had determined "directed, pulsed radio frequency energy" was the "most plausible mechanism", after examining symptoms experienced by diplomatic staff. It's worth noting that the study authors did indicate that a more thorough investigation would be needed.

Although health problems were first documented in late 2016, reports on the matter were not raised until 2017, after dozens of individuals reported symptoms. The unusual development was eventually dubbed the "Havana Syndrome."

Initial reports suggested that afflicted individuals began first hearing an odd noise for a period of time, often late at night in their homes or hotel rooms. In some cases, the sudden wave of headaches and dizzy spells would prompt an individual to become nauseous.

With no clear understanding of what was happening, the Trump administration subsequently declared that the health problems were the likely result of a coordinated attack against American diplomats.

By August 2017, tensions between the US and the island nation reached a new height as [two Cuban diplomats were expelled from the US](#). Some 15 Cuban diplomats would be expelled in the months that followed. Non-essential staff at the US embassy in Havana were later removed, leaving only a skeleton crew to keep the site running.

The Cuban government has [repeatedly rejected all allegations](#) that it had any involvement in the incidences, going so far as to offer its cooperation on investigations. Trump administration officials have refused to collaborate.

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Biden Picks Ex-Rival Buttigieg to Be Transportation Secretary - Transition Team

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden has chosen former Democratic rival and former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg to be his Secretary of Transportation, his transition team said in a statement.

"South Bend was once called one of America's 'dying cities,'" the statement said on Tuesday.

"Today, it's a hub of innovation and job growth. Mayor Pete Buttigieg led that resurgence, and has been nominated by the President-elect to continue that work as Transportation Secretary." Moreover, the transition team highlighted Buttigieg, if confirmed by the Senate, would be the first openly gay person to lead a Cabinet position.

Buttigieg was a popular candidate in the 2020 Democratic primaries before he suspended his campaign and endorsed Biden.

Buttigieg was also an intelligence officer in the US Navy Reserve and deployed to Afghanistan in 2014. He graduated from Harvard University and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University.

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Senate Confirms Trump Nominee Fisher to Serve as US Ambassador to Belarus

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Senate has confirmed Julie Fisher to be the next US ambassador to Belarus.

The Senate on Tuesday confirmed Fisher's nomination by voice vote.

In April, President Donald Trump nominated Fisher, a career diplomat, to be the first after a lengthy hiatus US ambassador to Belarus, essentially reestablishing full diplomatic relations between the two countries.

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US Population Projected to Exceed 332Mln by April 2021 - Census Bureau

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The population of the United States is expected to reach 332.5 million by April next year, US Census Bureau said in a statement.

"[T]he US Census Bureau released today an estimate of the population as of April 1, 2020 of 332.6 million," the statement said on Tuesday. "This number was part of a range of estimates. ... These population numbers do not come from the 2020 Census but are the results of Demographic Analysis."

The Census Bureau explained that the estimate was not an official conclusion given that the official count of the national census conducted earlier this year is still underway.

The analysis were based on birth and death records, data on international migration and Medicare records but did not include any data from the 2020 Census, which relies on collecting responses from households, the statement said.

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US Security Adviser O'Brien Cuts Trip Short to Address Hacking Incident - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien has cut his diplomatic trip in Europe short to return to the United States to address the recent hacking incident that targeted multiple federal agencies, National Security Council spokesman John Ulliot said in a statement.

"Ambassador O'Brien is returning to address the hacking incident," the spokesman said as quoted by the Wall Street Journal on Tuesday.

The report said O'Brien will be in meetings Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning followed by a high-level interagency meeting later this week.

O'Brien was on diplomatic business and was scheduled to return on Saturday. He concluded trips to Israel and France but had scheduled stops later this week in Italy, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

On Sunday, US media reported that a hacking group allegedly backed by a foreign government had stolen data from the Treasury Department and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

The Washington Post reported that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear," allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but provided no proof for its claims.

The hackers reportedly got access by compromising the Texas-based SolarWinds software. The company provides remote information technology services around the world, including several US government agencies and the military.

The Russian Embassy in the United States said US media reports accusing Russian hackers for the recent cyber attacks are unfounded.

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Biden to Choose Ex- Michigan Governor as Energy Chief to Boost Electric Cars - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden will announce former twice-elected Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm as US Secretary of Energy to utilize her experience in dealing with the auto industry in the transition to electric cars, Politico reported. Biden campaigned on replacing fossil fuels, including oil with clean energy, and creating millions of new jobs with more efficient, next generation electric cars, the report said on Tuesday. The transition will also require investment in a nationwide greatly expanded network of electricity-charging stations to serve the future vehicles, the report also said. From 2009 to 2017, Biden served as vice president and he supported the Obama administration's massive subsidies to drive down the costs of clean and renewable energy sources. However, those efforts failed to displace the traditional fossil fuels in the marketplace.

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NASA Delays in Testing Lunar Rocket System Reflect Need For Increased Oversight - Report

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Repeated delays by NASA in tests of three closely related systems needed to return American astronauts to the moon illustrates a need for upgraded management oversight of lunar exploration plans, the General Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"NASA is awarding billions of dollars in contracts for future flights, but keeps changing its schedules and plans for system upgrades to support these flights. We recommended NASA increase oversight measures for these upgrades following Artemis I," the report said on Tuesday.

Artemis I refers to the first of three test flights of three closely related systems being built by NASA - the Orion crew capsule, the giant Space Launch System (SLS) rocket and ground systems needed to support lunar exploration, the report said.

The most recent delay set a November 2021 launch date, with the postponement reflecting a 36 month slip in the initial schedule that was announced in 2014, due in part to "manufacturing challenges," the report added.

This new launch date fails to account for the impact of COVID-19 on the US space program while past delays and cost overruns increase pressure on NASA to meet its latest launch schedule, according to the report.

Costs of the SLS, the most powerful rocket ever built, have increased by 42.5 percent, while cost overruns for the entire program have surged \$3 billion to a total of \$11.5 billion, the report said.

NASA is pursuing an aggressive goal to return American astronauts to the surface of the Moon by the end of 2024. The success of NASA's plans hinges, in part, on two upcoming test flights. An uncrewed test flight and subsequent crewed test flight are intended to demonstrate the capability of a new launch vehicle, crew capsule, and ground systems, the GAO said.

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Pompeo Discusses Venezuela With Colombian President - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed with President Ivan Duque over the telephone a peaceful transition to democracy in Venezuela, the Department of State said in a readout.

"Secretary of State Michael Pompeo spoke with Colombian President Ivan Duque. Secretary Pompeo and President Duque discussed their mutual goal of a peaceful transition to democracy in Venezuela," the readout said on Tuesday.

Pompeo and Duque also discussed joint US-Colombian efforts to meet the needs of Venezuelan migrants and refugees who had fled their country, the readout also said.

"The Secretary expressed our gratitude to the Colombian people and government, who are now hosting more than 1.7 million Venezuelan refugees," the readout added.

Pompeo also pledged to continue helping Colombia meet public health needs arising from COVID-19, as well as efforts to rebuild Providencia and San Andres islands after the recent devastating hurricane, according to the readout.

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US Approves \$500M In Sale of Electronic Warfare Aircraft to Italy - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The State Department gave the go-ahead to a proposed \$500 million sale of electronic surveillance and electronic warfare systems for two Italian Gulfstream G550 aircraft, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a press release.

"The Government of Italy has requested to buy articles and services to support the integration of two (2) Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Electronic Warfare (AISREW) mission systems onto two (2) Italian Ministry of Defense provided G550 aircraft," the release said on Tuesday. "The total estimated program cost is \$500 million."

The proposed sale will help to improve the security of a NATO ally, which is important for political stability and economic progress in Europe, the release added.

In addition, the deal would increase interoperability between the US and Italian air forces by allowing Italy to upgrade its electronic warfare capabilities and modernize the nation's ability to conduct airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance operations, according to the release.

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US Defense Chief to Visit Southern Command for War on Drugs Briefing - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The acting US Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller is flying to Florida to receive a briefing on the current state of the war on transnational drug trafficking organizations at Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) headquarters, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller will travel to Naval Air Station Key West [on] December 16," the release said on Tuesday. "He will ... receive a briefing on the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF South) and its work with 26 partner nations to degrade transnational criminal organizations, while reducing illicit trafficking to the United States."

The Defense Department said in the release that Miller will meet with SOUTHCOM commander Adm. Craig Faller.

"JIATF South conducts detection and monitoring operations throughout its Joint Operating Area to facilitate the interdiction of illicit trafficking in support of national and partner nation security," the release said.

SOUTHCOM is one of the six unified commands with responsibility for US military operations in the Caribbean, Central America and South America, as well as security cooperation with defense forces in the region.

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New York AG Demands Trump Organization Hand Documents on Fraud Probe After Court Order

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney-General Letitia James said the Trump Organization must hand to her office, as ruled by a court, additional documents to aid an

investigation into the holding company for the businesses of the president, who will be stepping down in January.

"A judge just ruled that the Trump Organization must turn over additional documents related to my office's ongoing investigation," James said via Twitter on Tuesday. "We will continue to follow the facts wherever they may lead us."

James' response came after the ABC network reported that a judge in New York rejected the US president's claim of attorney-client privilege to shield the documents from the state's top prosecutor.

In August, James announced that her office had taken action to force Trump's personal business organization to comply with investigations on whether he wrongfully altered the value of his assets to get loans and reduce taxes. Specifically, Eric Trump, the president's son and executive vice-president of the Trump Organization, had been ordered to comply with the request.

For months, the Trump Organization failed to fully comply with subpoenas filed by the attorney-general's office with regards to the probe that began after testimony to Congress by the president's now convicted personal attorney Michael Cohen.

After years of defending Trump, Cohen turned against him after being jailed in May 2019 for three years for multiple financial crimes, lying to Congress and for campaign finance violations related to hush money payments to two women who claim they had affairs with the US president.

James said the president's personal business company had stalled, withheld documents and instructed witnesses, including Eric Trump, to refuse to answer questions under oath.

Trump's latest legal challenge comes after the US Supreme Court ruled in July that he did not have broad immunity from a state grand jury subpoena. Trump, who lost the November 3 presidential election to Democrat Joe Biden, will leave office on January 20.

Born in New York City, the 74-year-old Trump was a resident of New York all his life until he moved out in 2019. He now claims Florida, where he owns a property on Palm Beach, as his permanent residence, though he most of his time at the White House in Washington, DC.

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China Airlines Takes Delivery of First of Six 777 Cargo Aircraft From Boeing

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - China Airlines, the national carrier of Taiwan, unveiled the first of six aircraft in a bid to increase capacity to move cargo at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has emptied many passenger flights, Boeing said in a press release.

"An operator of all-Boeing freighter fleet, China Airlines debuted its new 777 Freighter during a ceremony in Taipei to mark the carrier's 61st anniversary. The airline is set to take five more 777 Freighters as part of an order announced at the 2019 Paris Air Show," the release said on Tuesday.

"Air cargo demand has risen in light of the global pandemic and has played a critical role in maintaining profitability for our airline despite the downturn in passenger traffic," China Airlines Chairman Hsieh Su-Chien said in the release.

The 777 Freighter is the world's largest, longest range and most capable twin-engine freighter. The airplane has a range of 9,200 km (4,970 nautical miles) and can carry a maximum payload of 102,010 kilograms (224,900 pounds), according to the release.

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Pence Plans to Take COVID-19 Vaccine, Urges Americans to Persuade Others to Do Likewise

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence said he plans to receive a coronavirus vaccine in the coming days and he urged every American to encourage friends and neighbors to abandon any reluctance due to unfounded concerns over safety.

"I look forward in the days ahead to receiving the vaccine myself and doing so without hesitation. The American people can be confident that while we moved faster than the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] has ever moved, we have literally not compromised any standard of safety," Pence told a news conference flanked by officials overseeing the distribution of hundreds of millions of doses in the coming months.

Pence spoke as local officials throughout the US made a point of getting vaccinated on television to persuade Americans that fears over vaccine safety are unfounded.

"Be confident. We have cut red tape but we have cut no corners when it comes to the development of this vaccine, Pence said.

Overall, about 8 in 10 respondents in an ABC-Ipsos poll this week said they would get vaccinated, about half as soon as possible with the remainder saying they would wait, presumably to see what happens to millions who choose to take the shot right away. Healthcare workers began giving volunteers initial shots of a vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech this week following Friday's approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The FDA is expected to approve a second vaccine developed by Moderna later this week. Both vaccines, which require two doses spaced weeks apart, have proved about 95 percent effective in clinical trials, with allergic reactions rare and common side effects limited to headaches, fever and fatigue that can prompt recipients to take a day off from work.

US Health Secretary Alex Azar, who appeared with Pence, said vaccinations should be available to every American who wants one by the end of June.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik)

LAVROV VISIT TO BOSNIA

- * Two members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Zeljko Komsic and Sefik Dzaferovic, have refused to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who is currently paying a working visit to the country.
- * Lavrov called the incident with the refusal of members of the Presidium of Bosnia and Herzegovina to meet with him insignificant, since their decision did not look independent.
- * Russia sees no need to revise the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially if such attempts are made from abroad, Lavrov said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CEASEFIRE

- * The ceasefire is observed along the entire contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said on Tuesday.
- * Armenian protesters will return to the streets in the capital Yerevan on Wednesday as pressure grows for the prime minister to quit over a peace deal he agreed with Azerbaijan.

TURKEY REACTS TO US SANCTIONS

- * Turkish Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar expressed the belief on Tuesday that Washington's new sanctions, imposed over Ankara's acquisition of Russian S-400 missile systems, were undermining partnership, and also pledged that the country would protect its people from the air threat.
- * Turkey's political parties made a joint statement in the parliament on Tuesday to criticize the US sanctions against Ankara over purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense systems, Daily Sabah newspaper reported.

IEA REPORT ON OIL MARKETS

- * The International Energy Agency (IEA) on Tuesday revised its forecast for global oil demand growth in 2021 by 170,000 barrels a day to 5.7 million barrels a day (mbd), as the jet fuel consumption is expected to remain low.
- * The compliance of OPEC and non-OPEC oil producing countries with the OPEC+ production cuts last month fell by 2 percentage points to 101 percent, while Russia's compliance improved to 96 percent, the IEA said.
- * The higher oil prices are largely driven by "euphoria" over the start of mass COVID-19 vaccination, however the real impact of vaccines on the oil market can only be seen after the critical mass of people would be vaccinated, the IEA said.
- * The OPEC's oil production grew by 730,000 barrels per day month-on-month in November to 25 million barrels daily, with Libya leading the increase, the IEA said.

US POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

- * US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday became the highest ranking Republican to congratulate Democratic President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice-President Elect Kamala Harris for their election win last month.
- * US President Donald Trump continues his legal fight for re-election, White House spokeswoman Kayleigh McEnany told reporters when asked whether Trump recognizes Joe Biden's win after the Electoral College vote.

COVID-19 MEASURES

- * The US government has approved the first diagnostic test for the novel coronavirus that can be purchased over the counter and used privately at home, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced in a press release on Tuesday.
- * Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland have agreed on a start date of a COVID-19 vaccination campaign, the Italian Health Ministry said.
- * All Russia's regions have started vaccinating citizens against COVID-19, as the vaccine has been distributed, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said.

US Judge Orders Trump Organization to Hand Over Documents for Fraud Probe - NY AG

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has ordered the Trump Organization to hand over documents to aid an ongoing investigation into the holding company for the business of the outgoing president, New York Attorney General Letitia James said on Tuesday.

"A judge just ruled that the Trump Organization must turn over additional documents related to my office's ongoing investigation," James tweeted. "We will continue to follow the facts wherever they may lead us."

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US Senate Will Not Dissolve Until Passing Urgent Spending Bill - Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will stay in session as long as it takes to ensure that a compromise omnibus spending bill to fund the federal government, possibly with a COVID-19 pandemic financial aid package attached, will pass first, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell told a Capitol Hill press conference on Tuesday.

"It is still my hope we are going to get an omnibus appropriation [bill] and attached agreement," McConnell said.

The two main elements of contention between Republicans and Democrats - a liability protection package for business that Republicans want and increased funding for state and local governments in the pandemic crisis that Democrats want - should be put aside for the next set of negotiations with the incoming Biden administration, McConnell said.

"We can fight another day. ... We should focus on what we can agree on. It is still my hope we are going to get an omnibus appropriation [bill]... Our first job here is to try and finish this job with this administration. My concentration is on finishing up our work," he said.

McConnell said he would continue to work with current President Donald Trump as the incumbent chief executive until January 20 when President-elect Joe Biden is scheduled to be sworn in as the next US leader.

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UPDATE - Senate Republican Leader McConnell Congratulates Biden

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday became the highest ranking Republican to congratulate Democratic President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice-President Elect Kamala Harris for their election win last month.

"As of this morning, our country has officially a president-elect and a vice president elect," McConnell said. "Many millions of us had hoped the presidential election would yield a different result. But our system of government has processes to determine who will be sworn in on January the 20th. The Electoral College has spoken. So, today, I want to congratulate President-Elect Joe Biden."

Biden, speaking to reporters later, said he looked forward to working with the Senate majority leader.

"I had a quick conversation with Mitch McConnell today," the president-elect said. "I called him to thank him for the congratulation. Though, on the whole, we disagree on a lot of things, I think there are things we can work together on. We agreed we get together sooner than later and I'm looking forward to working with him."

On Monday, the Electoral College met and gave Biden 306 electoral votes while giving Trump 232 electoral votes. A candidate must receive 270 electoral votes to become president.

McConnell cited Biden's near five decades' in office, including as vice-president during the Obama administration, and also spoke of Harris' historical ascension to the vice-president's chair, the first for a woman.

"The president-elect is no stranger to the Senate," McConnell said. "He's devoted himself to public service for many years. And I also want to congratulate the Vice President-Elect, our colleague from California, Senator Harris. Beyond our differences, all Americans can take pride that our nation has a female vice president-elect for the very first time."

Trump has refused to concede his loss to Biden, saying the election was rife with fraud. He launched multiple legal challenges, including the last at the US Supreme Court, to nullify Biden's win and prevent the Electoral College from endorsing his Democratic rival. Almost all of those lawsuits, including the one at the Supreme Court, failed.

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COVID-19 Vaccines For Every American to be Available by June 30 - Health Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Vaccine supplies for every American willing to be inoculated against the novel coronavirus should be available before the end of June, with governors in every US state able to launch general vaccination programs by late February or early March, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar told a news briefing on Tuesday. "We expect to have enough supplies to vaccinate every American who wants it by the end of the second quarter of 2021. We believe we'll have enough product to vaccinate 20 million people by the end of December. We believe we will have enough product to vaccinate a total of 50 million people by the end January combined. And we believe that we can have 100 million shots in arms between first and second doses by the end of February," Azar said. Appearing at the same event, hosted by the vaccine manufacturer Catalent in the state of Indiana, Vice President Mike Pence characterized he anticipated buildup of vaccine supplies as the "beginning of the end of the coronavirus pandemic." Azar said the United States has contracts guaranteeing the purchase of 900 million vaccine doses with options to buy up to 3 billion. "We think it's realistic that our nation's governors could begin general vaccination programs in late February or early March," Azar added.

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McConnell Calls on Republicans to Refrain From Objecting to Biden Election Win - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has advised his Republican colleagues in Congress to avoid objecting to Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election, Axios reported on Tuesday. The report said McConnell asked his colleagues during a conference call earlier in the day not to participate in any activities rejecting Biden's election victory. Senators Roy Blunt and John Thune echoed McConnell's request during a private caucus lunch with colleagues on Tuesday, the report said. On Monday, the Electoral College confirmed Biden as the next US president with 306 electoral votes against Trump's 232. The US Congress will meet on January to count and certify the results. Republican electors in Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan held mock electoral votes on Monday, giving their votes to incumbent President Donald Trump as a symbolic gesture to challenge Biden's win.

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Biden Says Will Publicly Get Vaccinated for COVID-19 'Sooner Than Later'

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he will publicly get vaccinated for the novel coronavirus and had been advised by the country's top pandemics expert Anthony Fauci to do it as soon as possible.

"Dr. Fauci recommends that I get the vaccine sooner than later," Biden told reporters. "When I do it, you'll get notice and we'll do it publicly."

Pfizer is involved in a massive effort to get millions of doses of its coronavirus vaccine -jointly developed with Germany's BioNTech - out after the shots became the first immunization against the COVID-19 approved by US health authorities over the weekend.

Former Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton announced earlier this month their intentions to get vaccinated potentially on live television - to bolster trust and confidence in the vaccine among Americans. Following their lead, Biden said he too would take a vaccine on camera, as did Fauci.

The Pfizer vaccine is being administered first to healthcare workers and long-term residents of nursing homes. While some 100 million Americans are expected to be immunized by spring, resistance is also anticipated from those fearing side effects.

More than 16 million Americans have been infected with the coronavirus since January and more than 300,000 have died of related complications, data tracked by the Johns Hopkins University showed.

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Trump Still Involved in Election-Related Litigation - White House Spokeswoman

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump continues his legal fight for re-election, White House spokeswoman Kayleigh McEnany told reporters when asked whether Trump recognizes Joe Biden's win after the Electoral College vote.

"The President is still involved in ongoing litigation related to the election. Yesterday's vote was one step in the constitutional process. I'll leave it to him and refer you to the campaign for more on that litigation," McEnany said during a press briefing.

The Electoral College, whose members convened on Monday in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, confirmed Biden's victory by handing him 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232.

While Biden has been for over a month widely referred to as president-elect and has started the transition process, Trump has said he won the election and sought relief to his claims of fraud by seeking recounts and by filing lawsuits in state and federal courts.

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US Officials to Take COVID-19 Vaccine Publicly to Instill Confidence - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Several senior US administration officials will take the novel coronavirus vaccine publicly to instill confidence, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"There will be some senior administration officials taking it publicly to instill that confidence," McEnany said.

McEnany added that the White House will reveal in the coming days which senior administration officials will take the vaccine publicly.

President Donald Trump is open to taking the novel coronavirus vaccine and will take it as soon as his medical team determines he should, McEnany said.

Moncef Slaoui, chief adviser to the US COVID-19 vaccine program, said the United States hopes to give out the vaccine, developed by Pfizer under a joint-venture with Germany's BioNTech, to 100 million Americans by the spring of 2021.

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US, Portugal to Discuss Energy Security This Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State Francis Fannon will discuss issues concerning energy security during his trip to Portugal December 15-17, the State Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Assistant Secretary Fannon will discuss energy transitions underway globally and how the United States and Portugal can optimize outcomes, as well as how to advance opportunities for US-EU energy policy cooperation during Portugal's European Union Presidency starting in January 2021," the statement said.

Fannon plans to highlight the United States commitment to clean energy technologies, the statement also said.

During the talks, Fannon will also underscore the United States' efforts to ensure reliable access to critical energy minerals from diverse suppliers, the statement added.

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Canadian Faces Bioterror Charges For Sending Ricin to Police, Prisons - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury indicted a Canadian woman on eight bioterror-related charges for mailing envelopes containing the deadly poison Ricin to police departments and prisons in the state of Texas, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Between Sept. 14-21, [Jane] Ferrier allegedly sent envelopes containing letters and a powdery substance to multiple local agencies. These included the El Valle Detention Facility, Hidalgo

County Adult Detention Center, Brooks County Detention Center, Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office, Brooks County Sheriff's Office and Mission Police Department," the release said. "The substance sent is alleged to be Ricin."

The Justice Department said Ferrier is currently detained in a Washington, DC jail awaiting trial on similar charges.

Ferrier was arrested at a US-Canada border crossing in September on suspicion of sending a ricin-laced letter to President Donald Trump, the Justice Department said earlier. The Quebec resident was found to be in possession of a loaded firearm, a knife, 294 rounds of ammunition and a bulletproof vest at the time of arrest.

Shortly after her arrest, the Canadian National Microbiology Laboratory confirmed that ricin was found during a search of Ferrier's apartment, Sputnik reported earlier.

Ricin is a deadly poison with no known antidote that can be extracted from Castor beans for which no antidote exist, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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US Authorizes Antigen Test as First At-Home Diagnostic Test for COVID-19 - FDA

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US government has approved the first diagnostic test for the novel coronavirus that can be purchased over the counter and used privately at home, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced in a press release on Tuesday. "Today, the US Food and Drug Administration issued an emergency use authorization (EUA) for the first over-the-counter (OTC) fully at-home diagnostic test for COVID-19, the release said. The FDA said the test is authorized for individuals two years of age or older, including those not showing symptoms.

"Today's authorization is a major milestone in diagnostic testing for COVID-19. By authorizing a test for over-the-counter use, the FDA allows it to be sold in places like drug stores, where a patient can buy it, swab their nose, run the test and find out their results in as little as 20 minutes," FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said in the release.

The Ellume COVID-19 Home Test is a rapid, lateral flow antigen test, a type that runs a liquid sample along a surface with reactive molecules. The test detects fragments of proteins of the coronavirus from a nasal swab sample from any individual two years of age or older, the release added.

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Pelosi Invites Congressional Leaders to Meeting on US COVID-19 Relief Package - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has invited fellow congressional leaders to a meeting on Tuesday to try and strike a deal to fund the government and send out another round of COVID-19 relief, CNBC reported.

"The meeting would mark the most significant effort yet for the four leaders to come to a bipartisan agreement on a package that could get through a divided Congress," the report said. "It is unclear now whether all of the congressional leaders will agree to talk Tuesday."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, as well as House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, have been asked to attend the meeting as Congress was running out of time to avoid a government shutdown and send another round of aid to the US public, the report said.

In March, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act dispensing \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

In the past few months, however, Democrats and Republicans were locked in a bitter disagreement about a successive relief plan to the CARES Act. The stalemate appeared broken last week after a bipartisan group of Democrats and Republicans proposed a \$908 billion relief bill, which led the two sides to resume negotiations.

On Monday, the bipartisan group proposed to split that \$908 billion package into two: a \$748 billion bill with new unemployment benefits, small business aid and other programs that have received broad support from both sides, and a second \$160 billion bill of highly-contested liability protections for firms and aid state and local governments. The second bill could end up falling out of the deal if the first goes through.

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Whelan Family Says It Hopes Biden Will Work on Paul Whelan's Release From Russian Prison

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The family of US citizen Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence in Russia for espionage, expressed hope on Tuesday that the upcoming administration of Joe Biden will work on his release.

"We are confident the US government will continue to work on Paul's behalf even as there is a transition to President Biden's administration," the statement said. "Perhaps the State Department will finally be able to have conversations with their Russian peers about [his] case." Russian President Vladimir Putin's call for cooperation between Russia and the United States based on equality and mutual respect gives the Whelan family hope, the statement also said. In a recent call to his family, Paul Whelan expressed concerns over difficult conditions in his prison, including coronavirus and cold temperature in barracks, his brother said.

"The chief state sanitary doctor who oversees Camp IK-17 imposed a special quarantine effective December 10," he said.

Whelan, who is also a citizen of the United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland, was arrested in Russia in December 2018 on charges of espionage and sentenced by a Moscow court on June

15. He denies being involved in espionage and insists he was in Russia to attend a friend's wedding.

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US Offers Poland Financing for Nuclear Power, Other Zero Emission Energy - EXIM Bank

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Poland agreed to open investments in nuclear energy and other zero-emission power projects to US companies receiving export credits, the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"The agreement includes, but is not limited to, support for projects in nuclear energy, in particular in support of strategic projects under Poland's Nuclear Power Program; low- and zero-emission technologies; clean energy innovation; and critical energy infrastructure, including cybersecurity solutions," the release said.

The agreement is part of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by Reed and Poland's Minister of Climate and the Environment Michał Kurtyka, the release also said.

Reed and Kurtyka also signed a separate MOU with Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, Poland's official export credit provider, aimed at promoting economic cooperation between the two agencies, the release added.

EXIM provides credits, risk insurance and discounted loans to support sales of US goods and services to international buyers, according to the release.

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Biden Asks Americans Not to Travel to Washington for Inauguration Due to COVID-19

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's inaugural committee in a statement on Tuesday asked the US public to watch the inauguration from home rather than travel to the nation's capital to attend the event in person.

"We're inviting all Americans to be a part of this inauguration by watching from home, rather than traveling to Washington, DC, in accordance with public health guidelines," the inaugural committee said via Twitter.

The official outdoor swearing-in ceremony will take place while other inaugural events will be held virtually, the inaugural committee said.

On Monday, the Electoral College met and gave Biden 306 electoral votes while giving President Donald Trump 232 electoral votes. A candidate must receive 270 electoral votes to become president.

Trump has said he won the election, but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety, and has initiated recounts in several states as well as filed lawsuits in state and federal courts to seek relief.

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Global Airline Group Seeks COVID-19 Vaccinations for Employees as 'Essential Workers'

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Transportation workers, especially airline employees, need to move higher on the priority list for coronavirus vaccinations due to their role in shipping supplies of the preventive inoculations throughout the world, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"We are not asking for aviation workers to be on top of the list, but we need governments to ensure that transportation workers are considered as essential when vaccine roll-out plans are developed," IATA Director General Alexandre de Juniac said in the release.

Initial vaccine roll out plans in the United States and other nations focus on high-risk healthcare workers, such as those treating patients infected with the coronavirus, followed by elderly residents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

The IATA estimates that the equivalent of 8,000 Boeing 747 freighter aircraft will be needed to distribute hundreds of millions of vaccine doses worldwide.

By vaccinating airline and other transportation workers, authorities can ensure a functioning logistics chain, de Juniac said.

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US Sergeant Stationed in Germany Died of COVID-19 - Army Forces Europe

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A sergeant serving in a US signals battalion in Germany died of the novel coronavirus diseases (COVID-19) earlier this month, US Army Europe and Africa said in a press release issued on Tuesday.

"A Soldier assigned to the 44th Expeditionary Signal Battalion, 2nd Theater Signal Brigade in Baumholder, Germany, died December 9, of COVID-19 complications," the release said.

"Sergeant Setariki Korovakaturaga, 43, previously tested positive for COVID-19 ...He died en route to the hospital."

After Korovakaturaga tested positive for the coronavirus, he was placed under quarantine and later his symptoms worsened, the release said.

Korovakaturaga was the first soldier assigned to US Army Europe and Africa to die of COVID-19, the release added.

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Ex-US Official Sees Many Areas for Cooperation With Russia as New Biden Admin. Takes Helm

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States should work with Russia to stabilize bilateral relations in numerous areas while continuing efforts to repel Moscow's clandestine subversive activities, former Deputy Assistant to the US President and Senior Director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council Fiona Hill said on Tuesday.

Earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Joe Biden on winning the US presidential election and said that cooperation between the two countries would serve the interests of the whole world.

"There is plenty of scope as we look to the future with the new US administration coming in to work with Russia itself at an institutional and professional level to try to stabilize the relationship. What we are trying to say... is let's put an end to that subversion," Hill said during an online conference on US Agency for International Development (USAID) operations in Eastern Europe. USAID implements in the region the Countering Malign Kremlin Influence (CMKI) program that seeks to promote its energy independence from Russia, facilitate economic reforms and upgrade its political institutions and media.

"This is not about Russia, this is not about the Russian people. We are looking to partner with Russia, we are looking to take opportunities in advantage of areas where we can work together and find that common ground. I think it's really important," USAID Assistant Administrator for Europe and Eurasia Brock Bierman said.

Bierman also said it is important to recognize that "the Russian people play an important in the development of not just Eastern Europe, but globally."

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Washington Hospital Hosts First COVID-19 Shots to Ease Fears in Black Community - CEO

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Howard University Hospital, a premier healthcare facility for Washington, DC's African-American community, hosted a televised COVID-19 vaccine event for its workers on Tuesday, with hospital CEO Anita Jenkins being first in line to demonstrate the vaccine's safety.

"There's the historical perspective of everything from the Tuskegee experiments to experiments on women in the Black community," Jenkins said, referring to hundreds of black men who were secretly infected in a study of untreated syphilis beginning in the 1930s.

Jenkins reference to experiments on Black women likely referred to involuntary sterilizations, also dating back to the 1930s and - like the Tuskegee experiments - which continued at least into the 1960s.

"I believe in science. We are seeing people die every day in our hospitals. We watch them suffer. We have seen families and employees experience such death with COVID so I am excited and hopeful that this is a successful vaccine," Jenkins said.

Shipments of the first COVID-19 vaccine approved by US regulators began arriving at hospitals throughout the United States over the weekend, with healthcare officials trying to confront fears that the vaccines developed by Pfizer and BioNTech are unsafe.

Polls indicate that safety concerns have made a significant number of Americans reluctant to get vaccinated, at least initially, amid reports of more than twenty serious side effects during clinical trials.

The vaccine requires a booster shot 21 days after the initial inoculation. Jenkins said it remains unknown whether people will require annual vaccinations as with flu shots.

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Republican Senate Leader McConnell Congratulates Biden on Election Victory

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Tuesday congratulated President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice-President Elect Kamala Harris on their election win.

"As of this morning, our country has officially a president-elect and a vice president elect," McConnell said. "Many millions of us had hoped the presidential election would yield a different result. But our system of government has processes to determine who will be sworn in on January the 20th. The Electoral College has spoken. So, today, I want to congratulate President-Elect Joe Biden."

On Monday, the Electoral College met and gave Biden 306 electoral votes while giving President Donald Trump 232 electoral votes. A candidate must receive 270 electoral votes to become president.

McConnell cited Biden's near five decades' in office, including as vice-president during the Obama administration, and also spoke of Harris' historical ascension to the vice-president's chair, the first for a woman.

"The president-elect is no stranger to the Senate," McConnell said. "He's devoted himself to public service for many years. And I also want to congratulate the Vice President-Elect, our colleague from California, Senator Harris. Beyond our differences, all Americans can take pride that our nation has a female vice president-elect for the very first time."

Trump has said he won the election, but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety, and has initiated recounts in several states as well as filed lawsuits in state and federal courts to seek relief.

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US Designates Bahrain's Saraya al-Mukhtar as Global Terrorist - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated Bahrain's Saraya al-Mukhtar group as a global terrorist over receiving financial support from Iran, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the Department of State has designated the Saraya al-Mukhtar group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist pursuant to Executive Order 13224 for posing a significant risk of committing acts of terrorism that threaten the national security and foreign policy of the United States," Pompeo said. "Saraya al-Mukhtar is an Iran-backed terrorist organization based in Bahrain, reportedly receiving financial and logistic support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps."

Pompeo explained the terror group's self-described aim is to depose the Bahraini government with the intention of paving the way for Iran to exert greater influence in Bahrain.

"The group has plotted attacks against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and has offered cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials," Pompeo said. "This designation seeks to deny Saraya al-Mukhtar the resources to commit acts of terrorism."

All of the terror group's property and interests in property are blocked and Americans are prohibited from engaging in any transactions with the group, Pompeo added.

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Pompeo Accuses Lavrov of 'Attempts to Rewrite History' After Comment on UN Libya Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Tuesday that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has attempted to rewrite history in response to Pompeo's statement regarding the unassigned position of UN Special Envoy for Libya.

"Earlier this month, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in comments at the MED Dialogue, accused the United States of playing political games in the Mediterranean and stalling the appointment of a new UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Libya," Pompeo said. "It's unfortunate and unhelpful that Mr. Lavrov again gets the facts wrong and attempts to rewrite history."

During the event, Lavrov said that Russia is concerned about the unresolved issue of appointing a new UN Special Envoy for Libya, adding that the US diplomats have delayed the appointment, ignored the position of the African Union on the issue, tried to dictate their terms and refused to seek a compromise.

Pompeo said in the statement that the United States is actively engaged with allies and partners in the Eastern Mediterranean in promoting stability and security.

"In Libya, the United States supports the formation of an inclusive government that can secure the country and meet the economic and humanitarian needs of the Libyan people," Pompeo said. "Our overarching goal remains to bring Libyan parties to a negotiated, inclusive UN-facilitated political solution through the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. We want an empowered UN Mission that can accomplish this goal."

Pompeo also said the United States has worked with its partners on the UN Security Council to create the UN Special Envoy position and a complementary UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) Coordinator in UNSMIL's 2020 mandate renewal.

"Russia and China were the only UN Security Council members to abstain on the Security Council resolution renewing UNSMIL's mandate," he said.

In November, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to the members of the UN Security Council to inform them about his intent to appoint Nickolay Mladenov - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process - as the new Special Envoy for Libya.

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US Federal Reserve Joins Network of Central Banks Working to Reduce Climate Change - Board

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve System joined a global network of central banks and supervisory authorities working to mitigate adverse impacts of the climate change for the financial sector, the board of governors announced on Tuesday.

"It has joined the Network of Central Banks and Supervisors for Greening the Financial System, or NGFS, as a member," the statement said.

NGFS brings together central banks and supervisory authorities from around the world, supporting "the exchange of ideas, research, and best practices on the development of environment and climate risk management for the financial sector."

"As we develop our understanding of how best to assess the impact of climate change on the financial system, we look forward to continuing and deepening our discussions with our NGFS colleagues from around the world," Federal Reserve Board Chair Jerome Powell said.

The Board added that it began participating in NGFS discussions and activities more than a year ago.

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Moderna's COVID-19 Vaccine Shows 'No Specific Safety Concerns' - US Federal Regulator

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Moderna's coronavirus vaccine shows no specific safety concerns that would prevent US regulators from granting the drug emergency use

authorization (EUA), the US Food and Drug Administration said in a briefing document on Tuesday.

"Safety data from a November 11, 2020 interim analysis of approximately 30,350 participants ≥ 18 years of age randomized 1:1 to vaccine or placebo with a median of 7 weeks of follow-up after the second dose supported a favorable safety profile, with no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an EUA," the briefing document said.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prepared the document in advance of a scheduled meeting on Thursday to consider granting emergency approval for Moderna's coronavirus vaccine.